



# moving forward and growing together

## Interview with Sylvia Lyles

*Afterschool Matters had the opportunity to talk with Sylvia Lyles, Ph.D., program director of the Academic Improvement Programs Group in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, DC. Sylvia works on behalf of all of us in the out-of-school time and school domains to keep our concerns front and center so we can reach our goal of providing the highest-quality learning experiences for our children and youth.*

**Afterschool Matters (ASM):** We would like to re-introduce you to the audience of the Annual National Afterschool Association Convention and the readers of *Afterschool Matters*. Can you tell us about yourself and your own journey into the field of afterschool?

**Sylvia:** I grew up in Portsmouth, Virginia. When I was growing up, I was part of the ballet troupe, school band, and track team. But in addition to being involved with those activities, my parents had me involved with all types of activities in the recreation center we had in our neighborhood. That was how I became familiar with the afterschool world. Most of the staff came from the elemen-

tary school that I attended. But it wasn't a very formal, structured process, because we didn't have to apply to participate. Activities were announced at the elementary school—what was happening after school at the recreation center—and parents in the neighborhood just got you involved. It was a low-income neighborhood, so I'm pretty sure the funds were subsidized. That's how I became involved, and that's what I know.

I spent 23 of my 29 years of federal service focused on adult literacy, and then I landed at the Department of Education. There is a huge literacy issue here in the United States and particularly in DC. I became interested in what happens before we become adults. What's happening in our school systems? And lo and behold, the position came open in elementary and secondary education, and for me it was a lateral move. I thought it was my opportunity to really make a difference, especially when I heard it was afterschool within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

**ASM:** Why a particular focus on professional development?

**Sylvia:** Coming from adult education, when I came into the world of afterschool I had a lot to learn. I had a huge learning curve. So I spent a lot of time my first year out in the field, talking to afterschool professionals, providers,

researchers, practitioners—people down on the ground who are doing the work every day. And what I continue to hear is that we need a system in place where we can all share ideas, we can all learn and grow together. I would love to say that this idea, the work that I'm doing now, is based on my creativity and innovation. But no, it's from the people who work every day down on the ground. And what they say to me is, "We really focus on professional development." I heard that so much while I was out there in the field. When I looked at all of the things that I needed to do to improve the afterschool program for the U.S. Department of Education, I had to prioritize, because there's so much we need to do. I am always fighting for more funding at the department, and I am going to continue to do that. That's my number one priority. But what the people said to me is that we need a focus on professional development. I think it's important because we have to change, we have to grow, and that's what professional development is about. We can't just continue to provide the same things for the kids of today that I had when I was growing up in the afterschool programs. We have to move forward and grow together.

**ASM:** From your own experience, what does it take to motivate people to take advantage of professional development opportunities and to grow and advance in their fields?

**Sylvia:** I call it the "WIIFM," the "what's in it for me." I've been associated with the military for a long time, and the military has taught me that when you look at strategic planning, you have to look at the WIIFM. (You know the military likes acronyms.) We can't try to grow this profession and professional development without incorporating the principles of adult education. What I think will make professional development work is being able to provide something to the people: something that has clear benefit, is delivered in a way that meets their learning goals or the way that they learn, can be applied right away, is engaging and innovative, and gives them what they need to do their job better right now. It's got to be something that people in the afterschool and youth development fields own and buy into.

**ASM:** How does the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program fit within the larger Department of Education agenda including No Child Left Behind, Promise Neighborhood Initiative, education reform, and so on?

**Sylvia:** We have so much going on. Secretary Duncan talks about—and a lot of my colleagues aren't comfortable with it—a longer day. He realizes that six hours a day, five days a week, nine months out of the year just doesn't work for successfully educating our nation's children. So he talks extensively about extending the time the children have to learn. He believes that we have an unprecedented opportunity to support all student learning, especially through positive youth development. My colleagues at the department, when they go out and talk to the states and to other folks, they are very clear about including extended learning time. And they use examples of extended learning time such as "afterschool" and "summer learning." So our work is ingrained across the department and all that's going on with the education innovation and reform.

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My position is this: For many years now, we have worked across the community. We *are* the extended learning time program. We have done what he has talked about doing for a long time. So we are his experts. What we need to do a little bit differently is to work more closely with the schools. I think the secretary realizes that if we extend the school day, we can't give children the same thing that they had in school. We have to give them something different. That's afterschool.

**ASM:** Much has been said about the achievement gap between groups of students and sets of schools. Do you see the 21st CCLC program, and afterschool and youth development programs in general, playing a role in closing that gap?

**Sylvia:** Research suggests a clear relationship between participation in afterschool programs and an increase in student achievement. I always go back to the original intent of this program, and that's to keep the children off the street and safe, in a nurturing environment. Over the years it has evolved, because there's no mistake that this program is grounded in the Department of Education.

However, I do not believe anybody would disagree with me when I say that a child who is under pressure from his or her peers can find it difficult to learn because he or she is sitting in class and in school scared. A child who doesn't have the confidence, or who does not have assistance to help build the confidence, can't learn. All these different things are part of making a

student successful. You can't separate that from the academic achievement. That's the story that I talk about at the department.

Of course we know that there are some gains in achievement when we're helping them with their homework, when we're working with them well in afterschool programs. But I think there's still part of the story that needs to be told. We need to find a way to capture the work that we do and measure it. We have to be able to measure exactly what we're helping these kids with, what helps them to learn each day. Academics are very important, and we have to measure that. I think we have some research that does, but I think it goes beyond that. Children have to be positioned so that they are confident, so they can think in a classroom and learn.

**ASM:** What promising practices have you observed in partnerships between community-based organizations and schools to deliver high-quality afterschool programs?

**Sylvia:** There is a program in Pennsylvania where the community-based organization works very closely with the school district to identify youth to come into the afterschool program. This program is focused on tutoring, but there's something a little different about this program. These afterschool staff—college students and teachers—go to the home or they go into the community, to other facilities, to offer tutoring or homework help. It's not always in one location; it's various and many locations across the community. They identify the youth and what their needs are. They address their specific needs and reach them where they are.

Another program is in Miami. This program is focused on science. One project is scuba diving. The whole community came together to purchase equipment for the youth so they could scuba dive. The youth are mapping the ocean and learning what happens in the sea. What really fascinated me about this particular program is that the youth who are involved are from low-income families. They would never have the opportunity to participate in these programs if it weren't for the community partnership. These youth are motivated; they're eager. They're doing well in school because they want to participate in this program. The whole community is wrapped around it. That's what it's going to take, and that's what President Obama talks about when he talks about "promise neighborhood."

**ASM:** What approaches can we use as program providers and researchers to reach out to particular populations such as rural and tribal communities, English language learners, and special needs children?

**Sylvia:** I'll never forget the first thing a colleague with expertise in special needs issues said to me. I called them "special needs children," and she said, "Oh, no, Sylvia, it's 'children with special needs,' because they're children first." It made me realize that I really didn't know who these children were and what they needed. And so the first approach I used is understanding. I oversee rural programs, and, in addition to 21st Century, I am also the program director for Native Hawaiian and Alaska Native programs. I've been involved in those programs for a long time.

I think the first approach is that we really need to get all groups to the table. We need to be genuinely concerned and want to know and understand what they need. The second approach is that they need to have valuable and significant involvement in the decision-making process. They need to be at the table at every opportunity. I don't move, I don't make any decisions about making proposals to the department, without discussing with the groups

involved what the issues are and getting their feedback. The Secretary of Education talks explicitly about rural education and children with special needs and what the issues are. He's committed, and so am I.

**ASM:** Finally, what inspires you to do what you do each day?

**Sylvia:** I am really committed to making a positive difference in a child's life. What better place to do that than in the U.S. Department of Education, doing the work that I do in the afterschool community? I love children and the impact that I can have in making life better for them. That's what causes me to get up every day.